

# Alfred Basbous, a career balancing form and media

BEIRUT: On the steps outside the Mark Hachem gallery, Fadi Basbous remembers the home of his father, Lebanese sculptor Alfred Basbous.

“Everywhere he was joyful, everywhere he looked for beautiful moments and his work reflects that positivity. Sometimes you see a question mark, sometimes you see his characteristic humor, his fun, his happiness,” he says.

“He really hated philosophy in his work,” adds Basbous, the director of his father’s estate. “Most of it was untitled because he didn’t want words to embellish it. He wanted the work to speak for itself.”

The sculptor’s son finds more recent modern and contemporary art to have taken a sullen turn.

“I feel strange when artists only use art to send a political message [and] make a statement about how chaotic the world is,” he says. “The art of Alfred Basbous was of beauty, of summer, of the sacred. You couldn’t see the [Lebanese] Civil War in his art. You couldn’t see ugliness.

“He went into the imagination and brought us a world that we can enjoy and where we can see the mystery behind beauty.”

Born in Rachana, Alfred Basbous (1924-2006) was the younger brother of Michel Basbous (d. 1981) and the older brother of Youssef (d. 2001). While all three brothers found renown in Lebanon, it was Michel who is acknowledged to have been among this region’s great pioneers of modernism.

When the elder brother worked to transform the family village to an open

air sculpture museum, Alfred began working with stone as his brother's assistant, finding his own voice in the latter '50s.

The brothers festooned Rachana with modernist sculpture, setting abstractions alongside traditional village architecture even after Lebanon veered into Civil War.

Fadi Basbous smiles at the strangeness of the scene.

“For 400 years the history of sculpture in Lebanon was empty,” he says. Even 60 years ago “you couldn't see many in galleries and museums. [The public] didn't have the potential to absorb sculpture ... It wasn't known.”

He believes that his father's move to Paris in the '60s to study at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, liberated him as an artist, with fewer cultural restrictions to bind his free expression. The experience never changed his father's homegrown sense of values or identity, he says.

Tellingly, the artist carved his self-portrait not in marble but in testa, a characteristically Lebanese stone.

“The values of family, of respect for the woman, were always sacred for Alfred,” his son recalls. His father frequently represented the female body, but he feels that these forms “were never vulgar [and] always elegant.”

“[The artist's] fundamental value was the human being,” he says. “He sees the human as a beautiful inspiration whose beauty demands respect.” He expressed equal respect for his media the artist consistently chose subjects and techniques that would uplift the material's unique attributes.

He gestured to “Au bord de l'amour,” 2001, a female nude his father sculpted in marble. Then on show at Mark Hachem gallery, the sculpture's subject is clearly evoked through its beige hue, the head held between its knees and the faint traces of spine across its back.

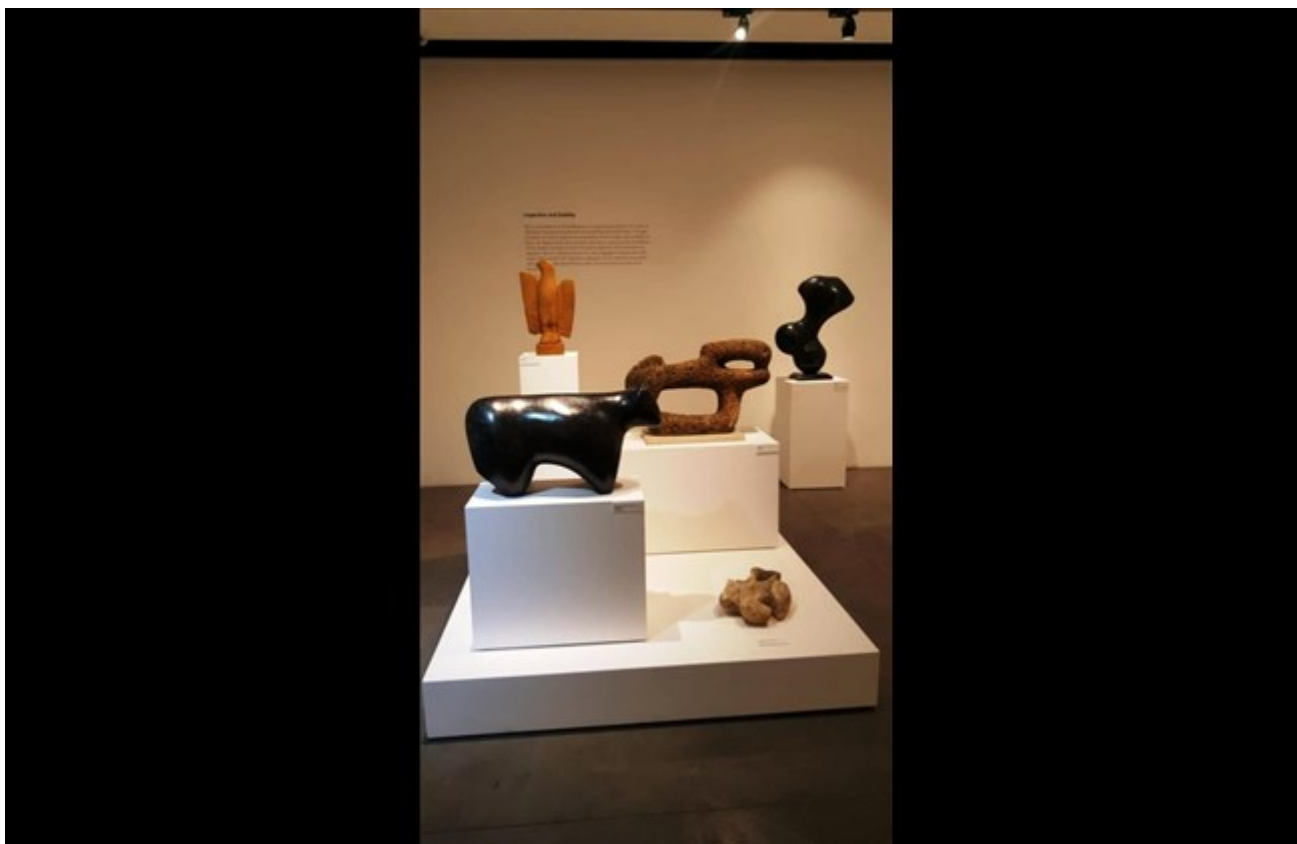
The figure's marble form seems impossibly supple, yet the nature of the material was not ignored.

The figure's density and solidity are obvious.

“He treated the marble differently than he treated aluminum or wood or [Plexiglas],” the son says. “He respected each material's own characteristics,” while aspiring to harmony and wonder.

He doesn't feel that his father's quest for beauty made his work conservative. The artist, he says, like those who inspired him Jean Arpe and Henry Moore constantly experimented with his materials to find new forms for beauty.

“He was an artist of discovery. He believed that his job was to discover new material, pose new questions ... to search for new materials and the best shapes for them.”



An ensemble of Alfred Basbous' sculptures, as seen earlier this year at Mark Hachem gallery. Photo courtesy of Mark Hachem gallery

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